

# **GREAT BRITAIN HMSO OFFICIAL STAMPS**

**By Tony Edwards and Betty Lucas**

The article 'Great Britain Official Stamps' (Stamp Magazine July 83) introduced 'Official Perfins', that is ordinary Great Britain postage stamps perforated with identifying initials by various Government Departments. Many of these stamps are quite scarce; in fact some are very rare indeed. They do not, however, in general command the usual high prices of rare stamps due to the smaller market of collectors who seek them. A few rare examples have changed hands for hundreds of pounds. Some official perfins are quite common. To sum up: Official perfins are fairly easily available and can be built up into an interesting section of any collection. Those perfinned by Her (His) Majesty's Stationery Office over the last hundred years form one such group.

## **Fiscal Perfins**

Long before postage stamps were perfinned,' it was common practice to perfin fiscal issues. This perfinning did not cancel them but simply identified the owner. Fiscal stamps had very high face values and the temptation to pilfer was great. Perfinned items were not attractive to pilferers as they were difficult to dispose of and easily identified.

About 1880 Government Departments started perfinning fiscal stamps using the common design of a crown surmounting the Department's initials, the whole being surrounded by a circle. Her Majesty's Stationery Office used the initials 'SO'.



It was never intended that such stamps should be used for postage but from 1881 fiscal and postage stamps were interchangeable so a small number of perfinned stamps intended for fiscal use found their way on to postal packets. These are very scarce and command high prices on the rare occasions they come onto the market. The earliest postal usage noted by the authors is of the high value 1883/4 series. Fiscal use by this Department at this time is usually indicated by the use of an eight-rayed star in black as a canceller, whilst postally used examples should show a clearly identifiable postmark.



*These two illustrations were not in the Stamp Magazine article but they, show the eight-rayed canceller on high value QV stamps. Thanks to John Marriner or the photocopies from his collection.*

## Withdrawal of Official Perfins

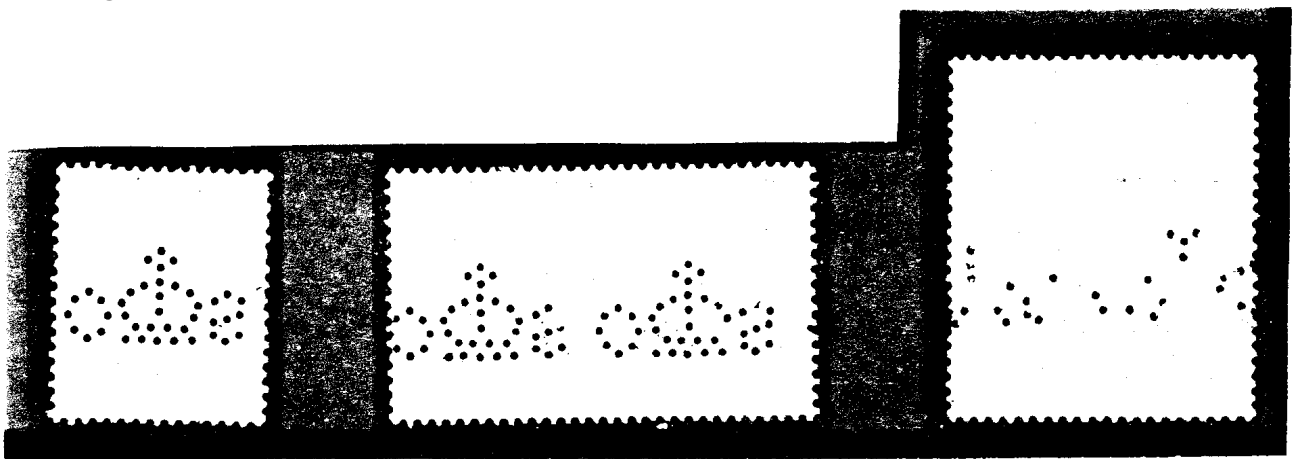
The use of perfins by, Government Departments was discontinued in 1904 at the same time as official overprints were withdrawn. There followed a twenty year period when the Stationery Office did not use perfins. It is recalled there is very little call for the use of adhesive postage stamps in Government Offices. However, the Stationery Office was a special case. Its function is to publish government documents and to make them available to the public. This involves posting, often bulky, parcels to many parts of the world. As official payment of Government mail is only available within the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, parcels to addresses in other countries must be prepaid with postage stamps. It is for this reason the Stationery Office must handle large numbers of postage stamps.

Although Government Departments discontinued the use of perfinned stamps at the beginning of the 20th century, private firms had continued the use of perfins. The Stationery Office, noting the success of this security device in the private sector, recommenced perforating its postage stamps. Their perfin was a neat design incorporating the initials "SO" either side of a simple crown. There is no record of the date of introduction of this perfin but the earliest recorded postmark date is December 20, 1912. This, together with a record of non-perfinned stamps used on October 25, 1922, suggests that the new perfinned stamps were introduced towards the end of 1922. The perfin is known on low value 1912/22 George V issues (SG 351 et seq.) but is very rare. It is also known, but equally scarce, on the 1924/6 issues, though it is quite common on the 1934/6 series, the Edward VIII and early George VI issues.

## **The Perforating Machine.**

Nothing definite is known about the exact design of the perforating machine used for this first postal perfin, but it was a treadle operated machine by Hurlin and Son and it is suspected that it perforated a row of twelve at one strike. The perforation was carried out by the Stationery Office themselves and for the most part work was carefully done. Practically all known examples have well positioned, upright perfins. Reversed or misaligned examples are practically unknown. This did not apply to the high value issues as these stamps are larger causing some difficulty in perforating, as they would not fit the machine. It seems that the operators made the best of a bad job and perforated the large format stamps as best they could. Examples of both horizontal and vertical perforations are known.

No amount of care by the operators could counter the deterioration of the perforating machine, particularly the small diameter pins which actually punched the holes to cause the perforation itself. These rather delicate items were easily damaged and it would appear that no attempt was made to repair or replace damaged pins. With constant use the die heads became progressively more damaged with the result that subsequent perfins are found with blind holes caused by missing pins. In fact King George VI examples of perfect strikes of the perfin are rare. In extreme cases as many as 15 pins are missing, making the design almost unrecognisable.



## **The Post Office Objects.**

In 1948 a philatelist wrote to the British Post Office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia asking for information regarding British stamps perforated 'Crown SO'. This came as a surprise to the postal authorities who did not know of such stamps. It was more of a concern to them as the perfins were illegal, the Regulations only permitting perforations with

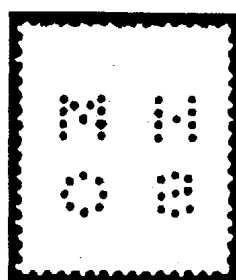
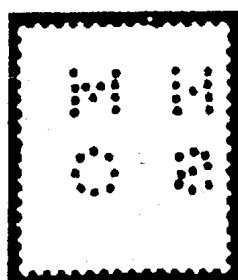
initials, designs, such as the crown, being forbidden. In a letter dated August 17, 1948 the Postmaster General informed the Stationery Office of this contravention and ordered them to arrange for perforation by initials only. The Stationery Office did consider simply deleting the crown but in view of the damaged state of the perforator, it was decided to produce a new die. Six months later the Stationery Office were able to inform the Postmaster General that a new die perforating the initials 'HM' over 'SO' was ready for use. They also mentioned that the remainder of the old stock (valued at £1,000) would be exhausted in about two months, indicating that over £500 worth of postage stamps were used by their Department per month at that time.

### A Further Twist

No further information regarding the introduction of this new die has survived in official records, but philatelists have identified a further twist to the tale. For a long time the perfin known as type IIB was thought to be the replacement die. However, a further die (type IIA) has since been identified. Die IIA is extremely rare, less than a dozen examples are known, being found on SG 485, 488, 489 and 490. *[Ed.-Rosemary Smith has this on 4d (SG 468)]* Its existence on these stamps only, with the earliest postmark being March 8, 1949, leads us to the assumption that this is in fact the original die which was almost immediately superseded by the almost identical die IIB. Although the two dies are very similar there is a good distinction; the former measures 12mm in height by 13½mm in length while the latter is 11½mm x 12½mm, and there are also significant differences in the shape of the 'M'. With die IIB being so common and IIA being so rare, here is a perfect chance for collectors to find a very rare stamp amongst common ones in an area which has not so far been heavily investigated. Perhaps there are a number of die IIA examples quietly mixed up amongst the very similar die IIB in collections and accumulations. (Good hunting - write in if you have a find!)

Rare

Die IIA



Die

IIB

## **A Common Perfin**

The die IIB perfin is common on all values up to £2 of KGVI and QEII in both sterling and decimal issues. It was in use until very recently (1983 this was written) with some examples still in stock at the Stationery Office, though they are not available for sale to the public. As this die was also heavily used, examples of blind holes caused by damaged pins are found, though this die has not developed damage to the extent found in die I ('S crown 0'). However, a constant fault is found on the fifth die from the left of the frame where the centre hole of the 'M' is missing and always has been since the early 1950s. A very large number of these were posted abroad and many must have been destroyed as 'damaged' specimens of common stamps some effort is required to trace them.

The Stationery Office have not perforated stamps since 1980 and their use by this Department is now quite rare. The reason for this change is the introduction of automatic stamp meters. So, after a number of years of use, the story of these unusual officials draws to an end.

## **Found - The Perforating Machine**

In the course of research for a book covering all Official Perfins (*still available from our Publications Officer I believe*) the authors had occasion to contact the Stationery Office about their perfins and found that they were not at all well-known even within that Department. However, with some kind help from officers there it was eventually discovered that not only did small stocks of perfinned stamps still exist, but the perforating machine was still in existence stored in a warehouse in London. By kind favour of the Stationery Office the authors were able to inspect this machine.

The machine has a brass identification plate indicating that it is a Sloper manufactured machine. However, further investigation showed that it was in fact the original Hurlin machine which had been reconditioned and modified to a twelve die machine in the last quarter of 1949, according to Sloper's records. These records also show that at the same time a new twelve die perforating head was provided. Thus the problem of the type II dies was solved. The Stationery Office records show that the 'HM/SO' die was ready for use in early 1949 so it must have been supplied for the Hurlin machine in its original state. Six months later the machine was being reconditioned by Sloper and given new perforating heads. It would appear Die IIA was the Hurlin die used

for about six months in mid 1949 and Die IIB is the new Sloper die used from late 1949 which is still in existence.

This machine perforates a horizontal row of twelve standard size stamps at a stroke. The sheet is then advanced and the next row of twelve perfinned. The perforating dies are removable for replacement or repair. The machine is in full working order and the authors were allowed to make a test perforation on a blank piece of paper. This confirmed that the defective "M" was in fact the fifth die from the right and it also showed a distorted 'M' on the right-most die. The 'M' on the second die has two pins missing, but this has never been seen on a stamp.

## References

*The History of Security Printing and Perforation of Postage Stamps*  
by Chas. Jennings ( 1967)

*The Handbook of British Perfins* by John Nelson (1967 & 1983)

*GB Official Perfins* by the Authors (1983)

All published by the Perfin Society of GB.

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